World Chronicle

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UNA-USA

With a membership of 20,000 and more than 100 affiliated local organizations, the United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA) is the nation's largest grassroots foreign policy organization, and the leading centre of policy research on the United Nations and global issues. In this edition of World Chronicle, William Luers, President of the UNA-USA, discusses the American public's perceptions and support for the United Nations.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. An opinion poll recently released showed strong support for the United Nations among US voters. The poll showed that over 70 percent of American voters had a favourable opinion of the United Nations, while 27 percent held an unfavourable opinion. In other findings, the poll showed that most Americans agreed that the United States should pay its arrears to the world body which currently stand at 1.6 billion dollars.

Our guest today is an expert on United Nations-United States relations. He is William Luers, President of the United Nations Association of the United States. Joining me to talk with Mr. Luers is Linda Fasulo of *NBC News* and Bhaskar Menon of *International Documents Review*

Mr. Luers, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

LUERS: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Luers, Ambassador Luers -- you were an ambassador earlier in your career -- tell us a bit about the United Nations Association of the United States? What is it all about, what do you guys do?

LUERS: You three know, as well as I do, what it means but let me explain. It's an old organization. It was founded -- actually the roots of it were founded during the League of Nations as you know. And then it sort of grew after the Second World War when the United Nations was founded when people were worried that once again, Americans would lose interest in an international organization as they did when they never joined the League. And over the years it has grown to be an important vehicle to keep attention on the importance of the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United Nations?

LUERS: The United States playing an important role in the United Nations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, I see, yes.

LUERS: It's directed toward the American public because each of their -- there

are 70 or 80 nations that have a UNA in them and ours is reaily dedicated to try and get Americans to take the UN seriously and understand what it does. We have 175 chapters across the country. We have probably 25,000 members. We have association with other organizations which are part of our broader group that probably constitute several million people. So it's the mother organization of those who are interested in the United Nations and in its programmes and the issues it touches.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you proselytizers would you say?

LUERS: We try, we try very hard. I wish we did a better job. Yes, we're advocates, we're educators and we're people who talk about policy issues. Those are sort of the three arms of what we do. We have been very active in promoting something called the model UN programmes and many out there in the audience may have either been participants in high schools and colleges. And they're wonderful. I went to one yesterday in Washington Irving High school in New York and it's astounding what it can do. The model UN programmes can not only develop the capacity of young people to play roles in the international community and try to understand how each country thinks about a different issue, but it's used in many cases as a way, as a model for how young people should think about conflict resolution. How do you make deals with people who disagree with you violently? And it's been a phenomenal success where it's worked.

LITTLEJOHNS: Would you say that the younger generation, by and large, is reasonably enthusiastic about the UN and about multilateralism generally?

LUERS: No, I can't make that statement. I think you'll find in communities, in urban centres like New York, the big cities in the United States where you have a natural mix of cultures, where you have Hispanics and African-Americans and people from – the whole variety of cultures as you get in the city – there's a natural interest in the global multi-culturalism. ! think it would be hard to say that our educational system in this country invokes in children a sense of the global realities and the problems that are presented by these many nations trying to work together on these many complicated problems. And I think one of our missions is to try to increase the degree to which high schools particularly, and colleges, of course, give instruction on world affairs because we

risk the possibility that with the United States, as healthy as it is economically, as feeling as good about itself politically as it does, and as sort of isolated as it is – it's practically the only country that does not have major problems at this stage in the world's development – that we could take very little interest to what goes on around in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States really does not need the UN does it, I mean, when you get down to it?

LUERS: It means the UN – let me go back. Yes, it does need the UN. It has to have the UN and that's our message. The other day, the President mentioned two things that were high on his agenda in a speech he made in San Francisco. One was, he strongly supported the rights for children as this Convention was being written. He never mentioned that it had anything to do with the United Nations . He stood strong behind the Kyoto Conference when he needed to deal with global warming issues and the environmental questions that are raised by global warming and he never mentioned that this was a UN body. But we have to have the United Nations. I mean .....

LITTLEJOHNS: So why didn't he mention it?

LUERS: I think it's probably an attitude that he has that the global efforts that are being made through conventions, through other agencies of the United Nations are so broad that he doesn't quite realize that they all come under this umbrella that we call the United Nations. I think probably there are 50 percent of the people in the United States who have ever heard of UNICEF wouldn't know that it had anything to do with the United Nations, even though "UN" is in it. The UNDP - United Nations Development Programme, WHO - World Health Organization, World Bank – these are part of a global network that we find vital to our well-being as well as to our relations with the rest of the world is something that is jut not on the table with most people.

MENON: Is there a perceived conflict do you think between the United States as a global superpower and an international organization which, if it is effective at all, would tend to limit the power of the strongest?

LUERS: Yes, I think you're talking mainly however about the peacekeeping issues – the issues that have to do with the Security Council. And I would argue that we're

facing yet another tough moment in the history of the United States' relationship with the United Nations, particularly in relationship with the Security Council in which because of the Security Council's make up and different point of views on key issues, as in the case of Kosovo, you have a body such as NATO that feels that in an area contingent to its security, a problem is being faced that the Security Council cannot resolve. So they have to go it alone and that is clearly a case in which the United States and other countries who are with us are finding that the UN Security Council and its structure in that area does not satisfy its particular needs at that time. The issue of whether that's right or wrong is something that I guess I don't want to get into right now, but it certainly is a major question that is on the table, brought about particularly by the Kosovo issue. On other issues though I don't think that most of what the United Nations does is inconsistent with the great power – the single great power nature of the United States today. On the contrary, I think that more and more we will see that so many of the world's problems that are managed in the area of health, children, women's rights, environment, the whole question of intellectual property, that these are issues that are dealt with through international conventions, organizations, separate agencies that are vital for us. We can't do the job ourselves.

FASULO: In following up a little bit on what you said about the President not connecting the UN with various conventions, I mean, obviously, if he is not aware of this, the public isn't. So is UNA making this a priority perhaps or what is your organization doing to sort of focus attention on the wide broad realm of UN activities?

LUERS: We announced, I think you were there at this conference where we announced about two weeks ago, a venture we're undertaking together with the Better World Fund and the UN Foundation, which was the large foundation set up by Ted Turner when he gave that billion-dollar grant over ten years to promote UN programmes and the understanding of United Nations. And a piece of that effort will go into a coalition that they are starting with the United Nations Association to promote, at the grassroots level. We're choosing 20 districts to begin with this pilot project to promote a much broader understanding of what UN means, what does the UN mean. Does it mean only the

Security Council? You should not just simply automatically have a frustrated feeling when you think about the UN just because the Security Council has not resolved today's problem, but you have to have a broad understanding of the fact that the United Nations agencies have a tremendous impact on the way our global community functions and our role in that. And so that effort which we are undertaking at the grassroots will be through the media, through interviews, through contacting not only the UNA chapters but other community leaders – we call them grass tops rather than grassroots – who are interested in and engaged in the world community and trying to get them to appreciate the scope of the UN's activities. And this is going to be a 12 million-dollar two-year effort and we'll see how it works.

MENON: But you know the problem usually with the organization is trying to popularize the UN, quote, unquote, is that if you're only singing the praises of anyone, whether it be of the superhero – people tend to get bored. You have to find ...

LUERS: Particularly with you, ladies and gentlemen of the media, you like to a tough story once in a while top.

MENON: No, it's not just that. It's something which was said about Milton's *Paradise Lost* that your sympathies are with the devil because he's so dramatic whereas the good side is ....

LUERS: Yes, everybody has read *The Inferno* of Dante but very few have read *Paradiso*, yes.

MENON: Exactly. So the point I'm trying to make is that how can you get over this particular thing because you, as supporters of the UN, cannot turn around and point to flaws on it?

LUERS: I don't see our role as being mindless supporters of the UN. I think that we lose credibility not only with the United Nations but with the American people if every time somebody calls us about something we just say what does the UN think about it, we think the same because that is not the way I think we should be. On the contrary, I think we need to be supportive critics of the way the UN is functioning. When it's not functioning well, we should say it and I think we should be honest about some of the

inherent weaknesses in the way the UN structure works. On the other hand, there's nobody really explaining the UN to the American people. The UN itself has to explain itself to the world and I think we have to supplement to some degree just the basic information about what the UN is. We're not talking about everything the UN does is right or everything that each agency does is correct. But the important message to get out is that the breadth of the activity of that huge conglomerate of agencies, which really functions with a very little amount of money when you look at it, the scope of their activity in the world, particularly in the humanitarian area ....

MENON: But the problem is, so much of that is taking place ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Before you complete that question .... This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is William Luers, President of the United Nations Association of the United States.

MENON: The comment leading up to- the problem with the UN is not so much of what it does -- what the UN system does -- is taken for granted. It's not visible as you pointed out and part of the problem also is that the drama of the international organization is not perceived. Everyone thinks that it's an accepted fact of life that it will be there forever and people who saw the UN at its creation know that this is not true.

LITTLEJOHNS: But how much drama? Isn't there an always boring speech?

LUERS: It's the non-drama you're talking about.

MENON: But that's precisely the point I am making. It's the drama of international organizations itself. It's the concept of it. It's a fairly new phenomenon. It did not begin till the last century and it has survived tremendous crises. The League of Nations did not survive and it led to a world war and it's quite possible that this particular attempt at international an organization need not survive. It's that drama I am talking about because if the system that is in place does not work, if that fails, we're talking of a major catastrophe. And that drama is absolute. How do you ...

LUERS: Yes, I agree with that proposition. I am not sure that's really on the table today and whether the United States has to perceive it in those terms because most young people have a very short sense of what history means and where were the great

tragedies. And how many people under 60 really have that sort of feeling about San Francisco when what the founding of this organization meant to the world at that time? The drama of the Second World War, even the drama of the end of the Cold War for those of us who lived through it, is something that is not strong in the memory of Americans certainly. I think Europeans probably from other countries have given its children more knowledge of the world than Americans tend to. But having said that, I think the story that has to be told is how vital it is today not how tragic it could be if it does not exist. Because there's a positive story to be told about the United Nations and about its agencies and about the service it gives to the world community and I still believe that the American people although, maybe as we were talking earlier, not a hundred percent behind the UN even though they say they support it, I think most Americans are idealistic and whatever they think about the world, they are touched by human tragedy and the possibility of doing good. And I think that's the core that one wants to touch in the Americans because I want to remind you that the United Nations Association is dealing with a community which is uninformed about the United Nations, which is the American community. And that's our role and I think that's something that if we do better, and we do it more broadly and we do it with people at a level that can have impact, that we'll be more successful than we have in the past and that's what this effort with the United Nations Foundation is all about.

FASULO: What do you expect, if you had a crystal ball, what do you expect this year in terms of any movement on the part of Congress to pay its arrears?

LUERS: I don't know. I'll tell you one week I think I'm sort of optimistic and the next day I hear somebody said something that depresses me and thinks that it cannot happen. Let me say several things. I think first, the President of the United States has to engage this issue. Without his committed leadership and his decision to go to the Congress and say: "Look, I want to make this work this year. If we don't do it this year, we're going to enter possibly a spiral in our relations with the United Nations if we have not paid our debt that could result in a further deterioration of that very important relationship."

LITTLEJOHNS: But Ambassador Burleigh has already done that without success because of this abortion thing which keeps coming up.

LUERS: Well, the question that I have on that issue is whether there is implicit in his relationship with Congress a possibility of making a deal. My sense is there is. But having said that, I still think that the new Republican leadership of the Congress, although already having said a few things about the Mexico City language suggesting –

LITTLEJOHNS: At the Population Conference?

LUERS: At the Population Conference... On the issue of hooking on to this bill, as has happened over the past several years, the bill to pay the arrears, hooking on a provision about family planning and the limitations that would be placed on that by the US government combined with something they call the Helms-Biden Amendment which has placed a number of other conditionalities on the UN functioning if we were to give them this money, pay our dues not give them the money. But those factors are still on the table and the congressional leadership has still not indicated a willingness to discuss these and to change the nature of this relationship. This is why I think the President and the State Department probably can have an impact on what the congressional leadership proposes this year. There was a launch just a few days ago by congressmen and women who are favourable to the cause of paying the debts, trying to launch a new effort, a bill, that would be positive. We are not clear how they will play out. I would bet, if I had to today, that the Congress will ultimately at least pay what is required so that we won't lose our veto – not to lose our vote which is 200 to 250 million dollars is exactly the....

MENON: Isn't it only a matter of law? Isn't it a legal matter? The obligation for the United States to pay its bills to the UN is under treaty law which is just under your constitution in terms of the legal presence it has in the American system so couldn't someone just take this to the Supreme Court and ask for a judgment?

LUERS: That somebody were violating our law and treaty obligation?

MENON: Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Who's going to take you to the supreme court?

LUERS: We might take your suggestion. I can't answer that question whether

there is a provision in the law which requires us to pay this that could be challenged in the Supreme Court.

MENON: It's a treaty adopted by and ratified by the Senate and that has a place in the American legal system.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the UN Charter is a treaty?

MENON: Yes, the UN Charter is a treaty to which the United States is a party.

LUERS: But whether it outlines all the complicated question of whether we pay 25 percent or 22 percent and whether it says that we have to pay for a certain percentage of the peacekeeping, you know yourself more than I do how complicated this whole issue of the 1.6 billion is and how people come to that number. So that whether it's specific enough to be explained through .... I mean clearly, you said it in the beginning in your introduction about the American attitude toward the United Nations and toward the debt arrears. I think they have to be somewhat separated. My own suggestion would be that although we're convinced that the positive attitude toward the United Nations is broadly based, it is not deep and people, as we were saying, do not have a profound understanding of what the United Nations is all about and how important it really is. However, on the issue of payment of arrears, I think most Americans just feel you should pay your debts. What you're saying, not so much a legal obligation but a moral and just good business obligation, that we damn well should pay what we owe. And I think that issue is probably felt more strongly by Americans than a deep understanding of what the United Nations is all about. So I believe those statistics that most Americans...

LITTLEJOHNS: But there's also this idea that somehow rather the UN does not give value for the dollar. To what extent do you and your chapters of the UNA come across that kind of attitude?

LUERS: Well, of course, the UNA chapters I think also find themselves very often dealing with people who more or less agree with them and getting out and punching the right-wing opposition or people who don't like the United Nations is not often something that's easy to do always at the grassroots. I do feel that we have said, the UNA has said, and others who are very close to the United Nations feel that there's still a lot that

can be done in reform but a lot has been done. They have maintained their budget at a controlled level for the last three years; the current Secretary-General has reduced substantially the people on the payroll and I think that the idea of reform has been very much ingrained in the way the Secretary-General is functioning. Now whether it's enough... But are there still a lot of inefficiencies? No question about it. But look at the American Pentagon for inefficiency.

FASULO: Just following up on what you're saying. I know here at the UN from speaking to various allies, strong allies at the United States, that there is tremendous resentment about America's failing to pay its dues and very often there's resentment among many countries to sort of take America's point of view as seriously as perhaps it should. Do you have any comments on that or any sense of how to capitalize on that phenomenon?

LUERS: First, I think that it is not inconceivable that the President and the White House don't appreciate this level of annoyance that we feel here in New York. I mean there's no question that anybody who moves around this community and talks to the ambassadors of even our most friendly nations appreciates the fact that there is this high level of frustration, and as you say, anger about why don't we do this. It's so little here. We're bragging about having a surplus in our budget this year – a substantial surplus – and 1.3 is not a lot or a billion six. And let me say this when you ask specifically what can be done, I would believe that it is important for the heads of the governments of these countries to let the President know. Most of these countries have another agenda with the United States that places itself above the UN issue and at some level it seems to me it would be nice if some of these friendly prime ministers and presidents would mention to the President, "Look you've got to pay your debts, we can't keep defending you."

MENON: When you go down to the audience in the United States, what would the individual American watching this programme do that you want him to do to resolve this issue?

LUERS: Write to congressmen, talk to as many influential people as you have in your community, to tell the story and learn about the story of the fact that we have been

in arrears for seven years to the United Nations. We now owe them 1.6 billion dollars and we are not paying our debts that we are legally obliged to pay. And I think the thing that tells the most to a congressman is how many letters he usually gets from the constituencies and that's the most important thing today.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Luers, we have only a few seconds left but what are you guys doing to counteract these wild stories about UN black helicopters taking over the national parks and all that kind of nonsense? Are you ....

LUERS: Are you saying it's not true?

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you come across it in your travels and ....

LUERS: Well yes, I think I was telling this beforehand. I was flying in Texas in a helicopter just a month ago and the man who was the pilot -- and just the two of us were there -- said : "I understand that you're working with the United Nations. Is it true the United Nations is taking over half of the national parks of the United States?" And I said it is a lie. They haven't got enough money to pay for their own park north of the UN.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Luers, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been William Luers, President of the United Nations Association of the United States.. He was interviewed by Linda Fasulo of *NBC News* and Bhaskar Menon of *International Documents Review*. I"m Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**